

Jessee, E. (2017) Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis. By Mark Cave and Stephen Sloan (eds.). *Oral History Review*, 44(1), pp. 168-172. (doi:[10.1093/ohr/ohw121](https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohw121))

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/150984/>

Deposited on: 07 November 2017

LISTENING ON THE EDGE: ORAL HISTORY IN THE AFTERMATH OF CRISIS.
By Mark Cave and Stephen Sloan (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 295 pp.
Softbound, \$31.95.

Listening on the Edge represents an essential contribution for newcomers among the growing cohort of oral historians who apply their skills in conflict and post-conflict settings. The volume is inspired by the realization that “literature on the best practices of oral history fieldwork in the aftermath of crisis is limited” (11). To address this problem, it includes chapters from a number of skilled practitioners whose insights on crises that have unfolded around the world speak effectively to the particular methodological and interpretive challenges of this particular application of oral history.

In the introduction, editor Mark Cave provides a helpful historical overview of the application of oral history to crises since World War II, beginning with the pioneering work of Samuel Marshall, Forrest Pogue, and Elena Poniatowska and ending with the Oral History Association’s present efforts to promote oral historical research into emerging crises around the world. From there, “Part I: Clamour” includes chapters by Selma Leydesdorff, Denise Phillips, Tamara Kennelly and Susan Fleming-Cook, Elizabeth Campisi, Taylor Krauss, and Ghislaine Boulanger. Leydesdorff’s chapter explores the impact of trauma and other forms of emotional distress on life history narratives as evidence by the account of Hanifa, a Bosniak woman whose husband and son disappeared during the 1995 genocide at Srebrenica. Leydesdorff’s insightful analysis of Hanifa’s narrative and the conversations that surrounded their interviews revealed Hanifa’s tendency to interpret her entire life through the lens of personal loss, resulting in the sense that a “whole world” had been obliterated with the murder of her loved ones at Srebrenica (31).

Next, Phillips considers the narratives of two brothers who sought asylum in Australia to escape persecution in their native Afghanistan. Their voices shed much-needed light on the ongoing marginalization and persecution of the Hazara ethnic minority community in Afghanistan, as well as the negative “longer-term effects of Australia’s rapidly evolving refugee policies implemented since 1999 to deter arrivals” (43). Simultaneously, her chapter explores challenges inherent in interviewing distressed narrators who may require—in order to feel comfortable—that the oral historian abandon scholarly reserve or listen to graphic accounts of physical violence, for example.

Kennelly and Fleming-Cook follow with their analysis of transcript excerpts resulting from survivors of the mass shooting at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) in 2007, revealing the difficult healing that can emerge through narrating stories of survival in an oral history project. They caution readers of the emotional burden of “listening with compassion,” particularly when the oral historian is personally connected to the crisis, while simultaneously recognizing the value of this endeavour in terms of helping survivors redefine themselves in a manner that breaks the cycle of entrapment that commonly emerges from experiencing crisis firsthand (70).

Campisi then reflects on interviews she conducted with Cuban rafters who fled political repression in Cuba the mid-1990s in the hopes of finding a better life in the United States. Their narratives and their reception (and at times rejection) by older Cuban exiles and the American public more generally prompted an awareness of the reciprocal gains for individuals and society from approaching oral history as a “social activity that can sensitize the collective to the need to provide healing opportunities for trauma

survivors, whose stories benefit the larger society because they offer wisdom for overcoming terrible life events” (89).

Next, Krauss applies Lawrence Langer’s forms of memory as they relate to the post-genocide recollections of a handful of Rwandan genocide survivors. Shifting from “anguished memory” (the inability to separate oneself from those who did not survive), to “tainted memory” (in which the speaker feels compelled to speak of necessary, if not always admirable conduct) and finally to humiliated memory (wherein the speaker’s inability to communicate an experience results in “burning helplessness”), Krauss complicates the simplistic assertion that oral history in the aftermath of crises can be therapeutic, even in instances where survivors find themselves compelled to bear witness (104).

Boulanger then concludes Part I by reflecting on the previous chapters in relation to her training in clinical psychology and psychoanalysis. She considers the inevitable blurring of roles that emerges as oral historians struggle to find a balance between documenting a historical event and responding appropriately to their participants’ needs, as well as their own needs when their minds come to be “invaded by the speaker’s unbearable experience” (123). In doing so, she emphasizes a crucial difference in perspective between the two disciplines, noting that as a psychoanalyst “my emphasis is on the narrator, whereas the oral historian’s is on the narrative” (112).

“Part II: Resonance” contains chapters by Mark Cave, Eric Meringer, Karin Mak, Eleonora Rohland, Maike Böcker, Gitte Cullman, Ingo Haltermann and Franz Mauelshagen, Steven High, David Peters and Mary Marshall Clark. First, Cave reflects on the infamous New Orleans Prison Evacuation Crisis as experienced by Louisiana

Department of Corrections’ officers—important witnesses whom were “also frequently vilified in the media explanations of such events, sometimes rightfully so” (144). This chapter is a noticeable departure from the volume’s other contributions as it addresses the particular challenges associated with conducting interviews among those whom Nigel Fielding has termed “unloved participants.” In doing so, he demonstrates the value of unloved participants’ narratives for developing “explanations that acknowledge longstanding social problems and help communities move beyond crisis in ways that make them stronger and more resilient” (144).¹

Meringer then analyses interviews with residents of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico as they with the goal of challenging media coverage of the drug war in which they were immersed that focused on the “standard sensationalist fare of drug lords and *sicarios* (hit men)” (153). He argues that media “distorts the nature of drug-related crime in Juárez by presenting the current crime wave in monolithic terms,” at the expense of the nondrug-related crimes perpetrated by so-called “security forces” and the police that represent a real threat for the city’s residents (156). In doing so, Meringer successfully restores “a level of humanity to the residents of Juárez that is lost in journalistic accounts focusing only on the inhumanity of the cartel violence,” demonstrating the value of oral history as an alternative to sensationalist media coverage (163).

This is followed by Mak’s presentation of the narratives of four Chinese women who were poisoned by working in a factory that produced nickel-cadmium batteries. Mak describes the measures involved in preparing for these interviews amid fears of heightened government surveillance and anticipating the women’s health problems, as well as grappling with the uncomfortable power dynamics inherent in “an outsider’s

going to China to collect and shape their stories” (180). The combination results in a powerful snapshot of the women’s lives, as well as their activism which forced the factory to stop producing nickel-cadmium batteries and provide financial compensation to the poisoned workers, among other positive outcomes.

Next, Rohland, Böcker, Cullman, Haltermann, and Maelshagen present the outcomes of an interdisciplinary project on the aftermaths of crises in the United States, Ghana, Germany, and Chile with the goal of comprehending attachment to place—why people might choose to return to or stay—in the aftermath of disaster. Their findings are necessarily complicated within and between case studies, but nonetheless reveal a tendency for people to prefer remaining or returning due to such factors as a subjective sense of safety, rejection of a more expensive life if relocated to a city, and the “healing potential” of returning to their pre-disaster homes (199). The attachment often emerges from the emotional capital that people assign to their homes, which must be weighed against “environmental risk factors... specific to culture and its particular way of interacting with place” (202).

High then shifts the discussion to interviews conducted with Rupert Bazambanza, the author of a graphic novel on the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, that explore through images as well as words “the meaning of mass violence in the context of a life lived and remembered” (215). He defends the value of the graphic novel, which he notes has been criticized for making atrocities appear comical or spreading propaganda, for its ability to reveal an individual’s truth, complete with its inherent “political tensions and contradictions of the current historical moment,” and to help people move beyond the violence (221).

In the next chapter, Peters examines crises of faith experienced by combat chaplains who offered pastoral care to soldiers in the midst of battles in Iraq and Afghanistan—making them both “a participant in the trauma experience and a caregiver for those who endured it” (233). He shows how many combat chaplains entertain competing beliefs—feeling “betrayed by others and by God” even as they encourage faith in others—resulting in a potentially fatal existential crisis (240). He likewise highlights similarities between the work of chaplains and oral historians, both of whom “help the culture at large understand the wars that shape our national life” (239).

Marshall Clark then concludes Part II with her analysis of the narratives of New York-based Arab American and other communities who were often perceived by outsiders as Muslims, and whose lives were negatively impacted by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In inviting people to contribute their diverse experiences of this “time of emergency,” the project revealed narratives of mourning, personal injury, discrimination and material loss alongside resilience, transformation and creativity as the narrators struggle against what she terms “a lost decade” in which national security has been prioritized over visible minorities’ civil liberties and human rights (258; 260).

The book ends with a conclusion by Stephen Sloan that speaks to the future of oral history’s application to crises around the world given its benefits and ability to inform oral history’s best practices. However, he also highlights the psychological weight of this application of oral history, noting that “interviewers need additional support when conducting crisis or disaster oral history projects” and that options for support should be considered in the early phases of research design (268). This comment is timely given recent efforts among many US-based oral historians to have their work excluded from

federal human subject regulation, and the realization that while as a discipline oral historians have solid standards and procedures in place aimed at minimizing harm for our interviewees and research assistants, we are often far more cavalier about ensuring minimal harm for ourselves.²

Taken together, *Listening on the Edge* advances the literature on the practice and ethics of crisis oral history by taking readers through the various negotiations that are often inherent in this work. Among its most important contributions, it offers insights on working with witnesses of traumatic events; the necessary distinctions between the often overlapping fields of oral history, psychology and journalism; the dangers of vicarious traumatization for the interviewer(s); and the necessity of bringing multiple experiences into conversation to reconstruct and comprehend how crises affect peoples' lives. In doing so, the volume clearly demonstrates the many benefits that can emerge from applying oral history methods and theory to the study of crises, while simultaneously exploring the sub-field's potential pitfalls and limitations. That each chapter is grounded in interview excerpts that bring interviewees' voices into conversation with the oral historians' analysis is a particular strength of this volume.

Erin Jessee

Scottish Oral History Centre, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, United Kingdom

¹ Nigel Fielding, "Mediating the Message: Affinity and Hostility in Research on Sensitive Topics," *American Behavioral Scientist* 33(5) (1990), 608.

² See for example, United States of Health and Human Services, "Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects," 8 September 2015, accessed 5 January 2016, <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2015/09/08/2015-21756/federal-policy-for-the-protection-of-human-subjects>; Clifford Kuhn, "Background on the current HHS Recommendations," accessed 5 January 2016, <http://www.oralhistory.org/wp->

content/uploads/2015/10/Background-on-the-Current- HHS-REcommendations-
Concerning-IRBs.pdf; Erin Jessee, “Anticipating and managing danger in oral historical
fieldwork, Part I: Reflections on the role of the interviewer,” *Oral History Review* 44(2)
(forthcoming 2017); and Zachary Schrag, *Ethical Imperialism: Institutional review
boards and the social sciences, 1965–2009* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press,
2010), 143-160.